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Commission on the Status of Women
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Item 3 (c) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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The five member organizations of Project 5-0: International Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW International), International Council of Women, International Federation of University Women, Soroptimist International and Zonta International, each in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, share the common goal of promoting the legal, political, economic, educational, health and professional advancement of women's human rights. Together, our membership represents more than a half a million women and men in 120 countries.

The continued, prevalent, systematic and even sanctioned violence against women throughout the world is a common concern of every member of Project 5-0 organizations and is an important focus of programmes and campaigns in each of our organizations. Violence against women is a human rights abuse. Our organizations have taken the lead in providing services, drafting and advocating for legislation, raising awareness through advocacy, education and training, and building national, regional and international networks to address gender-based violence.

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Project 5-0 members support the efforts of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to eradicate violence against women, and hold Member States parties to their commitments to end discrimination and safeguard women and girls. We encourage the use of the Optional Protocol to the Convention to report violations of the Convention responsibilities as an added tool to render Governments accountable to the women and girls of their country.

The establishment of gender equality must begin with the recognition of the equal value of female and male children in the home and in the community and the condemnation of all forms of family violence. The international community must speak out strongly against harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, dowry murder and honour killings that lead to death, disabilities and life-long mental, physical and psychological damage of millions of women and girls.

Schools can play an important part by fostering new attitudes of masculinity based on respect for girls and women of all ages and the important role of males in preventing gender violence. Yet, the widespread problem of male schoolteachers who sexually abuse girl students in some regions of Africa should be recognized and addressed.

Trafficking is a heinous form of gender-based violence, placing millions of women and girls in situations of abuse or exploitation such as forced prostitution, slavery-like practices, battering and extreme cruelty, sweatshop labour and exploitive domestic servitude. We urge the United Nations and its Member States to adopt and implement effective measures to punish those individuals who perpetrate these acts as well as those whose business is to profit by facilitating such activities. We call special attention to the unfortunate role of the United Nations peacekeepers and other internationals in the exploitation of women and girls.

More women and girls in the world are contracting HIV/AIDS than men — a fact that needs to be acknowledged and addressed by the international community as another form of violence against women. Women's inability to negotiate safe sex and refuse unwanted sex is a major contributing factor to the spread of HIV/AIDS. We implore the United Nations and its Member States to take strong and immediate leadership to prevent further devastation and death by creating laws and deterrents to protect women and girls from HIV/AIDS.

Women of all ages are singled out for atrocities in situations of armed conflict, with few consequences for perpetrators. As a tactic of war, women are raped, abducted, humiliated and made to undergo forced pregnancy, sexual abuse and slavery. Diseases, especially HIV/AIDS, spread faster during and after armed conflicts. Protection and support for women survivors of violence in conflict and post-conflict areas is grossly inadequate. We call on the United Nations and its Member States to implement and expand the provisions of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), by providing more information on, and services to, women in armed conflict, and through integrating the role of women into decision-making in post-conflict reconstruction and in peacemaking.

By and large the extent of gender-based violence is invisible because of lack of sufficient data, disaggregated by age. Moreover, fear, religious beliefs and shame prevent many women from speaking out on this issue. Media and information communication technology can be a powerful medium that would bring to light both

the problems and the best practices in handling violence against women. Yet, care must be taken that the facts regarding crimes of violence against women are made visible in a dignified manner and in recognition of the victim's right to privacy.

We call on the United Nations and its Member States to support the development of a database of good practices in handling violence against women and to promote equal access to such information by using appropriate combinations of information communication technology. Given the limited resources and other constraints, such as literacy of rural women, older technology such as radio can be more effective than new technology such as the Internet.

We applaud the United Nations for establishing the General Assembly open-ended ad hoc working group on integrating United Nations conference follow-up to integrate and coordinate implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic and social fields. We would like to request that the United Nations permit NGOs with consultative status to observe this working group and have access to the output of this working group to help to improve collaboration between Member States and non-governmental organizations regarding violence against women and other issues.

We hope that the United Nations will continue its efforts to work to bring this critical human rights issue into the open and in partnership with Member States and non-governmental organizations to place it firmly on international and national policy agendas with the allocation of adequate resources to implement commitments.